

Balancing Openness and Vigilance

By Shari Cohen

I had always wondered why “remember the Sabbath” was so important as to be included in the Ten Commandments alongside “thou shalt not kill.” I think I have finally realized why. Even in a democratic society, where multiple views and interests are always on the table, we are in desperate need of practices or resources that can help us to escape from dominant mindsets and to imagine alternative ways of thinking about and being in the world.

This has become clear to me in the ongoing debate about what was known, and by whom, prior to September 11. I agree with those who argue that the problem lay as much in the inability to imagine that someone could use a passenger plane as a missile to destroy the symbol of global commerce as it did in a breakdown of bureaucratic coordination; it stemmed as much from a failure of imagination as from a failure to gather and share information.

But the readiness of so many to give up civil liberties for safety demonstrates a similar lack of imagination. In conversation after conversation over the last weeks and months, friends and colleagues who had great hopes for the collaborative advances unleashed by new information technologies and by a borderless world have become profoundly pessimistic about the ability to realize these possibilities.

One of the major challenges of this moment in history is that of holding together these two impulses at once: How, at a time of greater vigilance – regarding terrorism and other emerging threats -- do we not lose sight of the openness that is our strength and might well be our best hope for the future? Why were we not able, at a time of openness such as that of the late 1990s, to imagine the needs for vigilance?

Imagination is the ability to visualize other realities than the one in which we are presently immersed. Imagination is the faculty that saves us from becoming so convinced of our existing assumptions about the world that we are unable to escape from them. Imagination enables us to become aware of our blind spots. And sometimes this can mean life or death, quite literally, or for the values we hold dear.

Interestingly, Shabbat offers a set of practices that stimulates this kind of imagination. As citizens, we ought to take the insights it offers seriously. We should also consider how to bring the spirit of these practices into our political process.

The basic injunction of Shabbat is to stop – for twenty-five hours -- engaging in that which occupies our minds and bodies during the rest of the week.

“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord thy God.” (Exodus XX:8-10) This injunction creates a space for looking at the world in unfamiliar ways simply by silencing those perspectives that prevail during the week. It also makes room for other ways of engaging the world: for being present without acting, for contemplation without planning. Its weekly recurrence allows for constant reevaluation and a natural pluralism.

Shabbat’s central contention that there are limitations to what we can know or accomplish is another important element. Imagining the world from a variety of different standpoints depends on our remembering that the ones that prevail during the week are by definition partial. “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them, and rested on the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.” (Exodus XX:11). After all, even God rested from the act of creating the world. For people like me, this must be taken metaphorically: as an acknowledgement of the limits of human power rather than a statement about God’s behavior or power per se. Thus Shabbat warns us against the human inclination that we can become “God-like” by thinking we know the entire truth or that we can act in the world without unleashing unintended consequences.

But Shabbat does more than provide a means to extricate ourselves from our accustomed ways of looking at, or of being in, the world. Another essential aspect of Shabbat is its aim to provide us with a “taste of the world to come.” This is a reminder of our utopian ideals and a renewal of our commitment to strive on their behalf, even as we know that those ideals are unattainable. This regular recognition of our potential to deploy human capacities to address our current dilemmas and understandings ever more effectively, creatively and ethically lifts us out of the frustrations of our necessarily incremental progress in our day-to-day work.

Can these aspects of Shabbat really help us overcome our seeming inability to imagine the ideals of openness and the needs for vigilance at once? Not directly. But at this time of unpredictability, baffling change and insecurity, we need practices that strengthen our capacity to simultaneously hold apparently contradictory ways of thinking about the world. Maybe this has always been true, which would explain the prominent place given to Shabbat in the Ten Commandments.